

VZCZCXYZ0000
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHQT #2874/01 3261948
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 221948Z NOV 06
FM AMEMBASSY QUITO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5747
INFO RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL 1467
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA 6205
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 2186
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ NOV LIMA 1182

UNCLAS QUITO 002874

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE, SIPDIS

DEPT PLEASE PASS TO USOAS AND USAID/LAC

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [EC](#)

SUBJECT: Election: Slugfest Tightens, Getting Dirtier

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Private polls continue to show the presidential race between Alvaro Noboa (PRIAN) and Rafael Correa (PAIS) in a dead heat. With the formal campaign period closing at midnight on November 23, both candidates continue to fund a final publicity blitz, despite prohibitions on further spending. Both also appear to be partaking in mud-slinging and dirty tricks, hoping to attract the substantial number of undecided voters in the waning days of the campaign. The OAS election observation mission was late returning to Ecuador and is now dithering about whether to conduct a quick count. We have encouraged them to go ahead, and Embassy volunteers will participate in the mission on election day. We hope to have additional poll data to report by November 24, and expect the immediate post-electoral period to be restive should the final results be close. End Summary.

Candidates Tied, Many Still Undecided

¶2. (SBU) Sources at respected polling firm Informe Confidencial (IC) (please protect) tell us that preliminary information from their most recent poll shows Correa and Noboa tied at 39%. Another respected polling firm, CEDATOS/Gallup, has promised fresh results by November 24.

¶3. (SBU) IC's numbers indicate that 22% of voters are still undecided or intending to nullify their votes, (12% voted blank or null on election day in 2002). Pundits predict many undecided voters will decide during coming days. Polibio Cordova, director of polling firm Cedatos/Gallup, noted that indecision is at an all-time high for this point in the campaign. He attributed those high levels to the fact that both campaigns are looking more and more alike in these closing days; similar populist offerings have left the electorate uncertain of the choice they are facing.

Noboa: Spouse Appeal

¶4. (SBU) Campaign activity officially ends at midnight on November 23. Neither candidate shows any sign of letting up in the last few days on the campaign trail or in paid media advertising, despite the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) order freezing both candidates' campaign accounts. (Note: The TSE's order does not affect existing media contracts, a loophole both candidates appear to be driving their campaign trucks through. End Note.) Noboa's TV ads prominently feature his popular and photogenic wife, Anabella Azin, who has already handily won her seat in Congress. Others offer testimonials from satisfied workers on his banana plantations, but Noboa's personal presence is relatively scarce.

¶5. (SBU) Noboa continues to campaign in the Sierra, stopping recently in the northern border province of Carchi and the populous province of Pichincha. He has also been drawn back to his base in the coastal provinces of Los Rios and El Oro, perhaps because Correa

has been making inroads there. He prominently attended mass while on the campaign trail November 18 and again on November 20. During a campaign event in Los Rios on November 20, he dropped to his knees and asked God to permit him to serve the Ecuadorian people. On November 18, Noboa gave away two wheelchairs and a computer at a campaign stop in Quito. Noboa continues to link the Correa campaign to Hugo Chavez and constantly claims that Correa is waging a dirty war against him through the leftist media outlets Ecuavisa and Radio Luna.

Correa: Family Man

¶6. (SBU) Continuing his second round strategy of mimicking Noboa's tactics to blur distinctions between the campaigns, Correa has been using his family as campaign props. In one constantly cycled TV ad, Correa walks into his home, greets his excited and charming children and his wife, introducing viewers to his family while conducting a monologue requesting voter support. Correa has also been dragging his reluctant wife, and even his aging mother, to campaign events to soften his aggressive public persona.

¶7. (SBU) Correa has divided his time recently between the Noboa strongholds of Manabi and Guayas provinces and his own voter base in Pichincha province. Between music and dancing he offers his own laundry list of populist promises: a bridge for a town in Guayas province; a promise to allow small fishermen in Manabi to fish for sharks; a promise to Manabi officials that a Manabi native would be the next Minister of Public Works. While not disavowing his position against a free trade agreement with the U.S. and against renewal of the Manta FOL agreement, Correa has concentrated most of his discourse on his plan to increase housing allowances to the poor. Medics accompany some of his campaign events, disbursing vitamins and de-parasitizing medicine. Correa also publicly donated a house specially designed to fulfill his promise to improve housing for rural poor, hitherto one of Noboa's core campaign tactics.

Correa Dirty Tricks

¶8. (SBU) Both campaigns have become increasingly bare knuckled. On November 21, Correa very publicly pre-empted what he claimed would be a Noboa-inspired dirty trick involving public release of a fabricated phone conversation between Correa and his alleged sponsor, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. (Note: The conversation has not been released as of this writing and we have no confirmation of its existence. End Note.) Correa supporters claimed to have found thousands of housing applications made to Noboa's campaign dumped in garbage cans, purportedly showing Noboa's insincerity. Meanwhile, Leftist radio station "La Luna" erroneously reported that Noboa's U.S. visa had been revoked by the Embassy because one of his banana transport ships was implicated in a drug bust in 1999. We have forcefully denied any such visa revocation.

Beefed Up OAS Mission Headed by Bielsa

¶9. (SBU) OAS Ambassador Hugo Saguier told PolChief on November 21 that Deputy Chief OAS Election Observation Mission (EOM) Moises Benamor would arrive in Quito November 22, followed by EOM Chief Rafael Bielsa on November 23. Former Chilean Senator Jose Antonio Viera will beef up and round out the OAS EOM team. Saguier said the OAS is internally considering whether to conduct a quick count, after the TSE inappropriately released the OAS quick count results in the first round after agreeing not to do so. A final OAS decision on the issue would be taken in OAS headquarters, probably by November 23. PolChief urged a positive decision, even if the results are not shared with the GOE.

Results Reporting Estimates

¶10. (SBU) Saguier said he had advised the TSE to regularly make official partial results public (beyond the real-time updating of official results on the TSE webpage tse.org.ec), to enhance transparency. The TSE has 10 days to announce final results, under the election law. Saguier believed the TSE would have 50% of the

votes officially counted by November 27; 70% by November 29, and 100% by November 30. A mid-level TSE official was more optimistic, claiming publicly that presidential results should be final by November 28. The results on the GOE's non-binding health and education referendum (referred to here as the "second ballot") will be counted separately and only after the presidential count is completed.

Supreme Court Survives Constitutional Challenge

¶11. (SBU) Elsewhere on the democracy front, on November 21, Ecuador's Constitutional Court threw out a challenge to the constitutionality of the process used to select the sitting Supreme Court in November, 2005. The challenge reportedly had initially attracted support from the PRIAN, PSP and PRE justices on the nine-member Constitutional Court. During the Gutierrez administration, these parties collaborated in Congress to pack the Supreme Court, contributing to the eventual ouster of both the Gutierrez government and the court. Other constitutional challenges to the current Supreme Court remain pending, as it acted to replace three corrupt justices.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Even with poll data incomplete and never completely trustworthy, Correa appears to have upward momentum. With the race apparently a dead heat among decided voters, final results will be determined by the relatively large number of undecided voters. PAIS and PRIAN efforts to turn out their vote will also be critical-and the PRIAN should have an organizational edge in that regard, after a decade of party-building. Should results remain close, exit poll and quick count results will not be publicly announced, harkening a period of uncertainty as the official vote count trickles in over the coming week. That uncertainty could prompt shows of strength from either or both sides on the streets, risking potential post-electoral conflict.